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ABSTRACT

This document examines political questions that surround the issue of literacy. "City Literacy Cuts" outlines effects of the most recent budget cuts in New York City. "Families, Inequality, and Power: The Cultural Politics of Literacy" (Deborah D'Amico-Samuels) focuses on the importance of understanding the different models used in interpreting the causes of illiteracy and the cultural politics of literacy. Three articles examine the issue of politics and literacy from different perspectives: "The Politics of Literacy" (Paula Finn), which presents a union's model for revising the politics of literacy theory and practice; "The Politics of the Language of Literacy: Spanish Literacy for New York Latinos" (Ofelia Garcia), which presents theoretical arguments of the necessity of using non-English languages in literacy instruction; and "Literacy & Common Sense" (John Garvey), which discusses the "need" for literacy. "Adult Literacy Education: Heading into the 1990's" (Francis Kazemek) reviews seven works that illustrate the changes in the last decade. "Research Review: Adult Learners' Perspectives on Adult Education" (Deborah D'Amico-Samuels) summarizes conclusions of the second phase of a study of the experiences and viewpoints of students from a sample of New York City Adult Literacy Initiative Programs. Other articles include profiles of programs awarded minigrants, a description of the National Center on Adult Literacy, and a list of Literacy Assistance Center publications. (YLB)

Information Update

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FROM THE EDITOR

The issue of literacy has become a front page news item. It is almost impossible to read daily papers, news magazines or to watch a week of nightly news programming without the issue of literacy being mentioned.

As people begin to refer to illiteracy as a social ill which results from a failure within the educational and political systems, elected officials respond by coming out strongly in favor of literacy. How can you be against literacy?

As the issue of illiteracy becomes seen as coupled with the nation's inability to compete effectively in the world economic market, leaders from business and industry respond by exploring the possibility of instituting literacy programs in the workplace. Perhaps the economics of literacy is really political in nature - and vice versa.

Within the field of literacy itself, much positioning and maneuvering, caucusing, aligning and reconfiguring occur daily. Power shifts are common. Meetings are held and attended; influence is exerted. Change occurs The give and take of politics is the order of the day. Adaptability is the by-word.

Maneuverings are not limited to the administrators and practitioners in the literacy field. Students are involved in the politics of literacy, as well they should be. How they interpret their role as students in this volatile and heady mixture should serve to instruct us.

We begin to examine some of the political questions that surround the issue of literacy in this edition of *Information Update*. The "City Literacy Cuts" outlines briefly the effects of the most recent budget cuts. Deborah D'Amico-Samuels' article, "Families, Inequality and Power: The Cultural Politics of Literacy," brings our attention to the importance of understanding the different models used in interpreting the causes of illiteracy. She focuses the discussion on the cultural politics of literacy.

Articles by Paula Finn, Ofelia García and John Garvey examine the issue of politics and literacy from differing perspectives. The Francis E. Kazemek article which has been reprinted from the Fall, 1990 edition of *Adult Education Quarterly* reviews selected works in the field.

In addition to discussing the politics of literacy in this issue, we are also pleased to announce the recipients of this year's LAC minigrant awards.

SELECTED CONTENTS

Special Issue

The Politics of Literacy

City Literacy Cuts

The current economic crisis has affected City funding for adult literacy programs. Nearly $600,000 has been cut from this year's literacy funds as part of Mayor Dinkins' efforts to close the budget gap, and even deeper cuts have been planned for the next fiscal year starting July 1991.

The city is facing a budget deficit of $648 million in this fiscal year and almost $1.6 billion in FY 1992. In response, the Mayor has ordered City agencies to cut services dramatically -- most agencies have been cut 9% this fiscal year and are required to plan for 17.5% cuts for FY 1992. However, the educational agencies, Board of Education and CUNY, have been ordered to take cuts at half the citywide rate (i.e., 8.75% in FY 1992), while other essential services such as the Health and Hospitals Corporation, Fire Department, and criminal justice agencies which are part of the Mayor's recently announced Safe Streets/Safe City program will reduce spending through cuts and productivity increases at rates that vary among the agencies.

This fiscal year, literacy programs have taken cuts at levels that correspond to the agency where they are located. According to John Casey, Director of the Mayor's Office of Adult Literacy, the total of the cuts across all the agencies this year comes to some $600,000.* "The reductions mainly come from leaving unfilled staff lines vacant and cutting OTPS (other than personal expenses) and some small reductions in services," Mr. Casey said. "There is no doubt that the cuts will hurt this year -- essential jobs will be left unfilled, there will be fewer classroom materials for students and teachers, fewer staff development opportunities, and LAC will have to reduce the number of newsletters it publishes -- but, in most cases, we have not reduced the number of contracted instruction hours available to students. We have maintained student services this year, but next year it will be more difficult."

Mr. Casey said, "Of course, even that is bad news," he added. "The emphasis will continue to be on reducing administrative and support services and maintaining, where possible, student services. But, increasingly it looks as though that will not be possible. We could lose up to $1.8 million in literacy funding, so it is inevitable that there will be loss of services and loss in quality of services. There is a point beyond which we can't and won't reduce support funds without cutting student services. It's pointless to maintain instructional hours if there are no funds for materials, for equipment, or for teacher training. We must make sure that the students receive quality education."

The City cuts come in a climate of fiscal problems also at the State level. Governor Cuomo recently announced state cutbacks and projected layoffs that are likely to affect State funds for literacy. With definite cuts in City literacy funds and possible State cuts, literacy programs are likely to be facing substantial reductions in services next year.

*As of January 3, the Mayor announced that because of a worsening budget situation, agencies would be required to cut additional millions from this year's budgets and that the expected budget deficit for FY 1992 would be between 1.8 and 2.1 billion dollars.

Literacy Assistance Center

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Funding Alert!

On Tuesday, December 18, 1990 a meeting was held at the Literacy Assistance Center to discuss budgetary concerns and to think about a collective response to the fiscal constraints being imposed upon programs.

In her invitation to Program Managers, Angela M. Covert, Executive Director of the Literacy Assistance Center, provided a synthesis of the funding information available at the time. She indicated that in FY 1991 the Mayor's Office of Education Services allocated $15.5 million for adult literacy. At the time of the December 18 meeting, a total of $470,916 had been cut from the budget on the first round of cuts - a reduction of 3.1% With a second round of projected cuts, adult literacy programs could lose another $267,476 (not confirmed), for a total of $738, 392. FY 1992 budget projections indicate a possible reduction of $1.2 million - $1.7 million. (At the time of the publication of this newsletter, John Casey points out that nearly $600,000 has been cut from City literacy funds for this fiscal year. He anticipates that educational agencies will be required to plan for cuts of at least 8.75% in FY 1992.)

The December 18 meeting was attended by representatives from each of the LPAs. John Casey of the Mayor's Office gave an update on the budgetary crisis and Amy Bachrach of City Project, an advocacy group made up of social service agencies throughout the city, presented an Alterbudget Deficit Reduction and Investment Plan. This plan advocates for alternatives to budget cuts as a way to reduce the budget gap. Discussion focused on the formation of an advocacy group composed of the entire adult literacy community, including practitioners and students.

Work is now underway to form a consortium of groups interested in advocating for adult literacy. For information, call Charlie Wertheimer, Beverly Clement or Lori Diamond at (212) 267-5309.

The *Information Update* is the newsletter of the Literacy Assistance Center. The Center also publishes a *Monthly Calendar* which provides readers with information on employment opportunities, upcoming events and funding possibilities.

Opinions expressed in these publications are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Literacy Assistance Center or of its funders.

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Subscriptions are free. If interested, please send name and address: Editor/*Information Update*/Literacy Assistance Center/15 Dutch St./New York, NY 10038

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Families, Inequality and Power: The Cultural Politics of Literacy

by Deborah D'Amico-Samuels

1

Call them America's "disappeared". . . .Partly literate, partly skilled, home-bound, poor, often abandoned by spouses and without friends, run ragged by their children, they live without hope. Their ambitions—for themselves and their children—are confined within the walls of their tattered homes, imprisoned by their own bleak histories.

In their isolation, these mothers and fathers begin "programming" their children for failure at an early age. They are unfamiliar with the ways in which parents can nurture an interest in learning; often, indeed, they find their children's education threatening—a reminder of their own failures, a wedge driving their children away from them. In a thousand small ways, these disappeared parents instill in their children a belief that education is not valuable, that it is not for them. Early on, these children begin to think that they are not cut out for the mainstream.

Call it a birthright of underachievement, passed along from one generation to the next (Perkins and-Mendel, 1989:4).

2

We believe all people are well educated in their own story. We know that entire communities do very little reading and that the prevailing view of this is negative, there is "something wrong" with these people. We believe there is a positive reason communities don't read: Our communities have oral traditions that contain, pass on and transform our knowledge and cultural richness. Now is the time for us to transform our knowledge and cultural richness. Now is the time for us to transform our oral tradition into a reading and writing one, by writing our own stories. . . .Reading gives us a tool to learn about and choose how we want to participate in mainstream culture *(MRP Update*, 1990:2).

The ability to define and describe others in print has traditionally been the prerogative of those with power. Thus, statement 1 is a description of people who lack literacy skills by people who have access to literacy, money, power, and policymaking. It is excerpted from a glossy publication describing a family literacy program which is a national model for such efforts. Statement 2 is an excerpt from a local newsletter of the Mothers Reading Group, a literacy program in New York City. It is written by program participants from the perspective of their own experience.

These two quotes are both about the causes of illiteracy. They both discuss the relationship between lack of literacy skills and socio-cultural background; they both proceed from a theory about how the transmission of literacy or illiteracy occurs among groups of people. Yet, they convey very different pictures of people who do not have facility with print, and of the consequences of that difficulty. Thus, they provide a good way of focusing a discussion around the cultural politics of literacy, and of family literacy in particular.

Literacy, Families and Power: The "Culture of Poverty" Model

Statement 1 begins from a kind of culture of poverty notion—that poor families cyclically reproduce the lifestyle that keeps them poor. That is, it is assumed that parents who have low literacy skills will, somewhat automatically, recreate these in their children. This is a blame the victim, deficit model approach, which looks at families out of the historical, social, and political context in which they exist. It assumes that schools and other social institutions are doing their jobs, and that if parents of children who are not doing well in school would only cooperate, their children would succeed in school and in life. It ignores all of the educational and historical work which carefully assesses the roles of schools and policymakers in creating conditions of failure for students who do not meet their expectations because of class, color, and cultural factors. It also ignores the many factors outside of education which influence jobs, salaries, and other indicators of "success."

According to this "deficit" model, families should succeed or fail on their own resources and talent. If they fail, the failure and the shame are theirs. If they succeed, it's due to their hard work and abilities, not to the social opportunities in the job market and in education to which they have access by virtue of who they are, and in what time and place they exist. The policy implications of attributing such power to families over their circumstances is that the United States remains the only industrialized country (with the possible exception of South Africa) without a coherent national family policy.

Literacy, Inequality and Power: A Critical Perspective from Mothers

The view in statement 2 of why some people don't read as well as others proceeds from an awareness of history. It acknowledges that there have been and are many valuable ways of transmitting knowledge, pride and sense of identity; for most of the time which humans have spent on earth these have been oral and community based. It recognizes the prevailing negative interpretation of lack of facility with print, and expresses the understanding that both the interpretation of illiteracy as well as its practical consequences have been instrumental in keeping people out of the mainstream. In their statement, the Mothers Reading Group tells us that literacy skills will provide important tools which can help people make choices about what their relationship to mainstream culture will be.

Implications for Practice

Charles Valentine, an anthropologist who recently passed away, was in the forefront of the intellectual and political fight against the notion of the culture of poverty which informs statement 1. In the beginning of one of his books, he describes the varied cultural life flowing around him as he sits in an apartment in an impoverished African-American neighborhood. His work resembles Denny Taylor's and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines' rich description of the literacy activities in the homes of Shay Avenue, a lower income black community in which she did research on home literacy practices. This kind of research can be the bedrock on which family literacy programs and school curriculums can build; it can be used to support the grounding of literacy skills in the values and knowledge of oral traditions.

In their book about Shay Avenue families,Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines devote several pages to a discussion of the many forms which poor families are required to decipher and complete for social service agencies. They thus convey a sense not only of the variety of literacy materials in the homes (poems, books, newspaper clippings, recipes, etc.) but of the way in which these households are connected to the wider society. In contrast, some family literacy advocates portray families in relative isolation and attribute an almost magical power to the practice of one parent sitting down with one child and one book. In one film on intergenerational literacy, a picture of this type was displayed along with a voice over saying, "One child, one adult, one book—put them together and magic happens." This conveys a belief that transmitting literacy is a process "naturally" or magically embedded in a specific kind of parent-child relationship and activity, one which calls forth a kind of storybook notion of a middle class family in which there is ample time, quiet, space and focused interest for this to occur.

Assumptions regarding how reading should occur, with whom and for how long—can make for additional tension in the design of family literacy programs and activities. The reading situation becomes thick with unspoken value judgements about what a family is, who should be considered members, how they should behave toward and communicate with one another, etc. In deficit model approaches, or where school systems adhere to rigid definitions and measures of reading and writing abilities, adults and children may be faced with the choice to become something very alien to themselves and their families or risk failure. This contrasts with the goal of the Mother's Reading program participants quoted above, who define becoming litérate as a way to expand, rather than narrow, their options for defining a relationship to the dominant cultural and political group.

Literacy, Families and Inequality: A Recipe for Change

If allowed to critically define and describe their own understanding of the relations among literacy, families and inequality, adult learners like the Mothers Reading Group can illuminate the complex kinds of power which families whose members lack facility with print have and don't have. The development of literacy skills can facilitate this learning process, building from the knowledge which students and practitioners bring to it about the exercise of power in their own lives. Only then can family literacy begin to fulfill some of the hopes for social transformation which have been so ambitiously claimed for it.

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An Interview with Sam Santiago

Joan Pleune of the LAC interviewed Sam Santiago, a VISTA volunteer at Bronx Educational Services, about his ideas for starting a hotline and a support group for adult students.

Joan: I know you've been thinking about how students feel and ways to help them. Could you let me in on a little bit of your thinking.

Sam: A lot of students I talk to have had experiences like mine. When I first started, I felt so bad about myself. I didn't want to live because every time I turned around there was something I couldn't do - fill out an application or open a bank account. It was so easy to become discouraged. When a student feels an emotional letdown, regardless of what the reason is, you should have people who try to find out why he feels the way he does and why he doesn't want to continue (with school). There are all kinds of reasons. I think students need a hotline. I think you need somebody you can call and talk to and really explain yourself why you are not continuing school. I don't mean like you call a cold-blooded 800 number.

Joan: Is it your feeling that there are a lot of problems interfering with adults going to school?

Sam: Yes. It could be a small problem that happens. Tutors are being switched, and they can't deal with that because they got personal with the tutor, they became friends, so it's a letdown too. It's emotions, and it's lifestyles, and how your life changes when you do learn how to read. You're not the same person you know. After they call the hotline, students need to go to a support group. You have to find a comfortable place, a private place for people to get together. I think if you support students, attendance will get better. A support group can tell them, "You can do it - you can change your life."

Joan: So you're saying that you would use your hotline to kind of grab people into a support group?

Sam: Right. You need somebody to reach out. All

(Continued on page 25)

The Politics of Literacy

by Paula Finn

Paula Finn was recently hired as Assistant-to-the-Director of National Education of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. Previous to that, she worked as the founding director of the union's New York City Worker Education Program.

One day last June, Francisco appeared at the education office of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union with six weathered legal-size pages of a document he had written on the duties and importance of student delegates to the union's Worker Education Program. He was asking to get the document typed and copied, fast, for his presentation at the next day's meeting. Nothing about his posture as he handed me those ruffled pages conveyed even the slightest consideration of his not having completed the sixth grade in the Dominican Republic. This was not about the sixth grade or no GED. This writing was not academic, per se. The six pages and his presentation at the meeting meant that he could contribute to an advancement which was at the same time personal and collective. Those pages bear testament to his insistence that learning, like work and love, is his inasmuch as he can also offer it to others. This is the kind of learning that emerges from and corresponds to the problems, the hopes, and the sense of humor of a community.

Francisco and one hundred and twenty or so neighborhood residents study at the Williamsburg, Brooklyn site of the union's larger Worker Education Program. The union established the site two years ago in the heart of a neighborhood stretching out from the shadows of the elevated tracks of the J and M trains. Growing numbers of Dominicans, Mexicans and Central Americans have made the neighborhood their home. They work for low and sub-minimum wages in the small businesses and sweatshops that have proliferated in Williamsburg and environs in recent years. The passage of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, and its Employer Sanctions clause in particular, has led to widespread discrimination against and fear and desperation among immigrant workers. Immigrant residents of Williamsburg are no exception. The ravages of the current drug epidemic are also in evidence throughout the neighborhood. It is in these streets that children and their families head back and forth to the bodegas, schools and small shops and fill the churches on Sundays.

The older women and men students stop and rest on the landings nightly on their way up the three flights of stairs of the Transfiguration School where the union holds classes. There they begin to read and write for the first time or prepare for the GED exam in Spanish and learn English as a Second Language. Through an active student delegate system, students have organized a series of workshops and discussions on worker and immigrant rights, AIDS, and the New York City public school system. The ACTWU education program lays a foundation for the union's collaboration with immigrant workers to improve their conditions of life and work. Through the program, the union helps workers and their families develop leadership skills and gain information and knowledge about a wide range of issues. From the outset, program teachers and staff and local residents began to delineate the interests and goals that would make study after a long day's work a valuable, even urgent, task.

It is in the context of these shared goals that Francisco had been driven, as he sat down to write those pages, to shape the spirit and direction of the Williamsburg program. His unsolicited document must raise questions to us as educators about the use of the term "literacy" in adult education. The amount of writing and the complexity of ideas contained in the six lengthy pages stand in contrast to the shaky handwriting, the abundant misspelled words and almost completely absent punctuation. The writing represents an act both bold and purposeful; this was no writing "exercise."

Critics have amply documented the varied and widespread misuse of the term "literacy." The prevalent characterization of ESL classes for native language literacy students as literacy classes shows evi-

dence of a broadly held - and ethnocentric - misconception with regard to literacy. In addition, the denigration heaped upon those deemed to lack "it" provides reason enough to rethink our recent obsession with literacy. The current focus on "workplace literacy" has supplied a pretext to scapegoat workers for national and economic ills. In most of the sweatshops where Williamsburg residents work, jobs do not require, nor do employers encourage, workers to improve reading and writing or English skills. Workers have not caused the mounting layoffs in the U.S. Clothing and Textile Industries. Instead, companies have sought even cheaper and more exploitable labor in Asia and Latin America.

A further problem with regard to "literacy," as viewed by policy makers, program directors and many teachers, is that it frequently remains divorced from a social context or any particular content of study (with the exception of narrowly functional job and "survival" skills). Most literacy programs, I suspect, enroll a majority of students with a multiplicity of literacy skills who, in addition to wanting to improve their reading and writing, also want to study about something. Many of us are familiar enough with "literacy" endeavors which persist in a haphazard search for subjects to which to attach literacy "exercises."

The ACTWU Worker Education Program presents one model for revising the politics of literacy theory and practice. As a model, the program's four salient characteristics include:

1) Its connection to an organization dedicated to social change. This automatically places the program in the context of the union's mission to defend the rights and improve the conditions of life for workers. The union brings to the education program the history, experiences and current challenges of the labor movement. The education program also feeds the union's dialogue with immigrant workers, its organizing efforts and its growth;

2) Essential to the ACTWU education program is the student delegate system. This system provides a vehicle for students to shape the program and to support its development. In this way students create a learning community of mutual support and advocacy;

3) The curricular objectives combine the acquisition of language skills and the GED with a focus on issues determined by students and teachers working together and;

4) Students are able to continue study at any level in their native language in addition to studying in English as a Second Language. This has been true since the program began in 1985. This year, ACTWU passed a national education resolution to the same effect for its programs nationwide.

Such a program design and the fact of Francisco's six page treatise insist on a revising of adult education. Other education programs are experimenting with similar innovations in program design and have helped produce remarkable writings and projects. This work urges a view of education as a process through which we learn about, celebrate and transform ourselves and the world around us.

Author's note: I would like to pay special tribute to the work and thinking of the educator Dino Pacio Lindin, who has significantly influenced the ideas laid out here.

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The Politics of the Language of Literacy: Spanish Literacy for New york Latinos

by Ofelia García

Ofelia García teaches in the School of Education at the City College of New York.

Although the limited literacy of adults has long been regarded as an exclusive problem of third world countries, the United States is now facing the reality of its own problems with functional illiteracy. And in New York City, a complex multilingual city with a dysfunctional public school system, literacy efforts have been mounted in the last decade. But along with an increased interest in literacy education for adults, there is much ignorance of the sociopolitical aspects of language(s) and a lack of recognition of the many language minorities that make up most of the functional illiterate population in New York City. I will present theoretical arguments of why the use of non-English languages in literacy instruction is a must, and in particular, I will focus on the Latino population in New York City and its need for Spanish literacy programs.

Although literacy efforts have been mounted internationally, illiteracy continues to plague the world. And in many instances, countries with a very high degree of illiteracy are also those where the State ignores the language minorities in their midst and carries out their literacy efforts in a single language. The reason for this one-language-literacy policy is clear. Literacy campaigns most often have two goals (as seen by Unesco and the World Bank). One is nation building, that is, the development of an awareness of belonging to one nation. The other is development and modernization, that is, the rapid spread of new technologies and ideas through education. It is thought that both goals would be better met by imposing one common language of education (Skutnabb-Kangas, forthcoming). But while the State pursues this goal, language minorities continue to feel the oppression, rejection and exclusion that comes about when the school system functions in a language with which they can't identify. Despite literacy campaigns, the absolute numbers of illiterates worldwide is on an increase (Unesco's Statistical Yearbook, 1988).

The United States claims to be a monolingual country, and English is indeed the language of power, prestige and access. But the linguistic diversity and cultural heterogeneity in our midst cannot be ignored, especially in New York City. Children of immigrants who come to the United States quickly learn English, and their parents yearn for the same. Some of these immigrants were professionals in their country of origin or members of the middle class. For these immigrants, English as a Second Language classes suffice, for they have the skills and values that are necessary for success in a market economy like the United States, once they learn English (see Greer 1972; Otheguy 1982). But many of those who come to our shores have no such skills. And expecting them to become skilled and literate in English-only classes shows how naive we are about the role of language in society.

Latinos in New York City are a diverse group. Although Puerto Ricans, citizens of the United States since 1919, make up the majority, in the last decade immigration from the Dominican Republic especially, and also from Central America and South America has been on an increase. And along with the professionals who represent the continuous "brain drain" from Latin America, there are many poor urban and rural dwellers who are victims of ineffective educational programs in their countries of origin. Victims also of the historical relationship of the United States with Latin America, Latinos arrive in New York City with dreams, dreams of a better life for themselves and their children. All expect to face the challenge of learning English, but few are ready for the literacy inadequacy that they will soon experience in a city in which filling out forms is a daily activity.

Literacy is societally defined (García et al., 1988). Although the limited Spanish reading and writing skills that many Latinos have was adequate in their

less technological societies, it is just not sufficient to function in our complex city. While some efforts have been made to translate social service forms and applications into Spanish in the city, little thought has been given to why after all that, "Maria, still can't read."

The nature of the massive Latino (im)migration to the United States and the nature of the complex city into which they come makes it mandatory that we are ready with literacy programs in Spanish. Only in Spanish will we be able to give them the literacy tools they will need in order to function in this society. By insisting that adult education for these Latinos take place exclusively in English, we are effectively excluding them from the process, and we are denying the evidence of much sociolinguistic, pedagogical and psychological research.

There is much research evidence to support the fact that the rate of English language acquisition is positively correlated with the literacy skills in one's native language (Cummins, 1981). Therefore, for the Latino population with limited literacy in Spanish, English as a Second Language classes can neither advance their literacy skills or their English language skills. For them, a more integrative approach, taking into account their literacy needs, as well as their second language needs is necessary.

As literacy educators we have a responsibility to learn more about the role of language in society and the socio-political aspects of language. The language of education is an instrument both for inclusion and exclusion. By defining it narrowly as English-only, ignoring the multilingual population in our midst, we're only excluding the millions that we claim to want to help. As literacy educators we must be ready to combat "linguicism" in the United States, assuring that our literacy policy puts "basic human needs, not economic growth, in focus" (Skutnabb-Kangas, forthcoming). We must advocate that more Spanish literacy classes be offered, and that these be supplemented, when necessary, by carefully planned English as Second Language classes. Only an integrative approach, including both time for native literacy development, as well as second language development which builds on the first, could address the complex needs of the Latino population with limited literacy.

We have taken some steps in the right direction. For the last four years, El Barrio Popular Education Program, presently housed at Casita Maria has served as an example of a well-designed and integrated language/literacy effort for the Latino population. The efforts of Pedro Pedraza who dreamed of the project, Rosa Torruellas who directed it during the first years, and its present director, Klaudia Rivera, have been fruitfully corresponded. As a member of its Board of Directors, I have witnessed the development and growth of a bilingual literacy program that could be a model for our multilingual city. Our efforts as literacy educators should be in that direction.

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Literacy & Common Sense

by John Garvey

The literacy litany has become all too familiar and all too much taken for granted. Prevailing notions concerning "literacy" and "illiteracy" rely on assumptions that the lack of literacy precludes self-sufficiency, results in low self-esteem, costs society untold sums of money and promotes social irresponsibility. (I have put the two key words in quotation marks since, as I suggest below, our assumptions concerning what they mean profoundly affect our ways of thinking about the issues involved. I will leave the quotation marks out in the rest of the article only for reasons of stylistic convenience.)

In any case, the commonsensical way of discussing the issue associates illiteracy with unemployment, poor nutrition and health, crime and welfare dependency, unproductive and inadequate work, teen pregnancy and drug abuse. This assortment is then reinterpreted as an enormous social problem produced by illiteracy. It can get pretty silly as when one newspaper report suggested that illiteracy was the "harbinger of a class society" in the United States - as if we have been living in a socialist utopia all these years. On occasion, we are also reminded that literacy is good for you, that it can open doors and expand options.

Either way, it is far too simple an explanation for complex social realities. But it is the one that frames most of the appeals to individuals to enroll in literacy programs, as well as the appeals to the public and government for support of literacy education. In short, it is argued that people "need" literacy in order to avert social disorder and to participate fully in social and economic life.

However, most potential participants are quite aware of the many other personal and social factors that shape their circumstances and decision-making. Several literacy researchers have documented the unwillingness of many to participate in literacy programs (Fingeret, 1983; Quigley, 1987). And the statistical reports from across the country reveal that relatively few individuals participate for any length of time (Dieckhoff, 1988).) I would suggest that the lack of literacy is correctly understood as being less important than a host of other factors.

But, at the same time, individuals are likely to say that they think literacy is important and that they intend to participate. In short, there is a discrepancy between what people say and what people do. How come? Too often, verbal statements are taken at face value and we ignore the powerful evidence of what people do and don't do. For example, only a few of us are usually prepared to say that voting is not important, but obviously many millions of people let their abstention from the polls do the talking for them. It is a question of judgment and interpretation - do people not vote because registration and voting are difficult or because they are practically convinced that it is not worth their time. In a similar vein, are high school students dropping out or are they boycotting the schools (see Susan Anderson, 1989)? In the case of literacy programs, do people come and go quickly because they have too many problems or because they "read" the world of literacy programs as having little to offer them? I think you probably have guessed my answers.

I don't intend to be simplistic about this. I realize that most people are usually pretty ambivalent about a lot of things and that it's very seldom a completely clear cut issue. However, I would like to suggest that most thinking on these kinds of issues exaggerates the importance of what people say, examines what people do and don't do superficially and then discounts the possibility of very much rationality in the actions people take. Frankly, I want to tip the balance the other way.

If we do that, I think we might be able to develop a more nuanced view of the significance of literacy, which might have greater resonance for potential participants. Such a view would acknowledge that undeveloped literacy skills can create obstacles to participation in various activities and can frustrate the achievement of individual goals. It would also

acknowledge that there are social consequences of limited literacy - for example, the limitation of direct access to extensive information probably makes it somewhat easier for politicians and other advertisers to sell you things you neither want nor need. But, it would not dare to suggest that a lack of literacy has nearly as much to do with the predicament of Black folks as do long-standing patterns of institutionalized and personal racism. Nor would it fall prey to the kind of thinking that uses enhanced literacy as a pleasant sounding substitute for speed-ups at work.

This more nuanced view would be best developed in the context of a reinterpretation of "need." Usually, when it is argued that someone "needs" literacy, it is assumed that literacy is essential to the achievement of some more or less important goal - such as getting a better job, helping children with school work, and so forth.

But, there is another way of understanding "need." Human beings, alone among the animals, develop themselves over the course of their lives. Although there have been and continue to be many different notions of what such development can or should be, I think it fair to say that many of us wish to realize ourselves more fully as human beings. In fact, we "need" to do so. But, this process of self-realization does not begin from scratch with each new person born into the world. Human development has a fundamentally historical character to it. To some extent, our development proceeds from the legacy left us by those who live before us. But, of course, how that legacy is interpreted can lead to many varied ways of understanding the past and appreciating human discovery, invention and culture. We should be reluctant to accept the usual explanations of these matters. As Enzenberger once wrote about literacy, for example, we should remember that literacy was invented by illiterates. And furthermore, the accomplishments of literates are dependent on the labor of many millions who usually have not had much of an opportunity to become literate themselves.

Full human development, as such, requires freedom. Therefore, it must primarily be a matter of self-development. This need not be interpreted as a suggestion of narcissistic self-absorption. I don't think I'm talking about a more improved version of the "me" decade. Instead, such development would have to take place in the context of a mutual community of freely associated individuals. The relationship between the individual and the community would become a matter of considerable importance. People would develop themselves not so they could offer themselves or their children more profitably on the marketplace, but rather that they could participate more fully in the life of the community.

But, today, human development, including the enhancement of literacy, is subordinated to the incorporation of individual human personalities within the existing set of dominant social relations. Those relations are, as often as not, rotten ones. Remarkably, however, that profoundly limited development produces challenges to the existing set of relationships. When possible, people use schools, workplaces, communities, even families, to carve out space for their own free development. Needless to say, that development is distorted by what goes on outside. But, nonetheless, people use that space to learn how to survive in dangerous circumstances and to cultivate a distinctive way of understanding their worlds. Unfortunately, much that passes for literacy education is an attempt to replace the good sense that individuals develop with a common sense that ignores it. As Piven and Cloward (1980) argued some time ago:

> ...mass literacy inhibits the capacity of people to develop relatively autonomous interpretations of their particular social reality, for ordinary people do not produce their truths in literate form (see also Gramsci, 1971).

Contrary to Richard Venezsky (1990), who argues that there is no evidence of social control in efforts to promote literacy, I would suggest that there is no need to seek out a conspiracy in order to demonstrate that literacy education has social control dimensions. Even well-meaning literacy teachers can play a part.

If people choose not to participate, either by not enrolling at all or by attending briefly or sporadically, then efforts to induce or coerce that participation are, in fact, efforts to control people's behavior and/or to control their ways of interpreting their experiences. This occurs, in part, whether or not people actually

participate, for the individual who does not is encouraged to think that his or her difficulties are the consequences of their own choices. And if people's actual literacy capacities are obscured and discounted by the use of standardized tests, then efforts to insist that those tests be administered are, in fact, attempts to control how people think of literacy and of their own worth as literate beings. What else does it mean when a student thinks of him or herself as a fifth grade reader?

Definitional questions concerning literacy, therefore, assume some importance because those definitions shape the ways in which we assess capacities, design curriculum and provide instruction. The predominant definitional and curricular vision is one that still sees the act of reading and writing as primarily cognitive processes of instilling meaning into or extracting meaning from print. The skills involved are imagined to be identical for all But, as Denny Taylor (1989) has recently written, the individual process of becoming literate and the subsequent use of literacy are as distinctive as fingerprints. Each of us creates literacy anew. But, much that goes on in literacy education serves to make that act of creation more difficult, more painful and, ultimately, less fulfilling than it should be.

What I think happens is that a certain way of giving meaning to and taking meaning from print and a particular way of talking about it becomes taken for granted - commonsensical. As a result, it becomes very difficult to challenge. I am intentionally echoing the debates concerning standards and cultural literacy which, at bottom, privilege a certain way of knowing. It is not as if the defenders of "Western values"_ such as Allan Bloom and Diane Ravitch - don't know something about the contributions of various cultures to world civilization but rather that they want those contributions to be discussed in a particular way. Any challenge to that way are reinterpreted as being assaults on knowledge itself. It's tempting to write them off as racists, but I think that would miss the mark. They are so absorbed within the confines of their own logic that they really can see no other. Their common sense precludes anyone else's good sense.

I hope that we can avoid the same fate. I would imagine that most readers of this newsletter are familiar with the notion that standardized tests serve as gatekeeping devices. By extension, we who work in literacy often serve as gatekeepers - even though we try hard to give people the key. The unasked questions concern what we are keeping out and whether what's inside is worth keeping.

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Adult Literacy Education: Heading into the 1990s

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> If we are seriously interested in education for freedom as well as for the opening of cognitive perspectives, it is also important to find a way of developing a praxis of educational consequence that opens the spaces necessary for the remaking of a democratic community. For this to happen, there must of course be a new commitment to intelligence, a new fidelity in communication, a new regard for imagination (Greene, 1988, p. 126).

A democratic dedication to the developing intelligence of every person, faithfulness to the word and i' 'ransforming power, and a sense of wonder over the imagination's ability to create countless worlds - how have these ideals fared in adult literacy education during the last decade? After the exhortations and, at least, verbal commitments of the past and present presidents, work of numerous coalitions and councils, media offensives such as those of Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS), and the research and writing of various scholars, what has changed in the way adult literacy education is perceived and practiced in the United States?

My purpose in this essay review is to explore these changes, or lack thereof, as manifest in the current literature on adult literacy. I use Hunter and Harman's 1979 work as a touchstone: It was published at the end of the Right to Read decade (during which illiteracy was supposed to be virtually eliminated) and served as a catalyst for much of the adult literacy work and re-examination that occurred during the 1980s. My exploration is governed by Greene's contention tha education for freedom involves a commitme.t to intelligence, a loyalty to the power of the word, and an understanding of and respect for the world-making abilities of the imagination:

> When we think of the diverse and pluralist society we have been describing, we need then to have in mind a range of individuals or groups confronting a field of possibilities in which varied ways of behaving and reacting may be realized (Greene, 1988, p. 116).

Key Issues

In *Adult Illiteracy in the United States: A report to the Ford Foundation*, Hunter and Harman (1979) emphatically place literacy within a broad and complex socioeconomic and political context. "We

believe that schools, adult education programs, and the total system of formal and nonformal education for all ages reflect our society's vision of itself and its goal" (p. 3). Literacy, they argue, is not the primary cause of social and economic progress; likewise, illiteracy is not the reason for poverty and injustice. Rather, we must look at the socioeconomic system and examine how it fosters or discourages literacy development among different groups of people.

Illiteracy is a relative phenomenon, and as such it can only be determined by individuals and cultural groups themselves. "Functional literacy" involves the "possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives..." (Hunter & Harman, 1979, p. 7). There is not, nor can there be, some hypothetical level of literacy (for example, 5th, 10th, or 12th grade level) which can be applied to all persons. Literacy itself must be understood as a relative, personal, social, and contextual process. Thus, Hunter and Harman maintain that the exact number of functionally illiterate people is not known.

The authors are critical of the Adult Performance Level Project (APL) which attempted to estimate the number of illiterate adults. The APL study excluded meaningful input from people who could not read and write very well and ignored objectives such as developing the imagination and effecting change in oneself and one's community. It also promoted a class-based notion of literacy dependent upon years of schooling, income, and occupational status. And, indeed, the authors show clearly that illiteracy is a class issue. Though the number of illiterates is not known, we can examine the overlapping nature of those who are poor, have less than a high school education, and are members of racial and ethnic minorities. As Hunter and Harman (1979) note, "Inadequate education will probably be only one manifestation of their deprivation" (p. 56).

Hunter and Harman also are critical of much of the Adult Basic Education (ABE) endeavors because they tend to be middle class operations in terms of structure, content, and methodology and because they serve primarily those adults who most readily identify with middle-class norms and expectations. Most ABE programs fail to meet the needs of the hard-core or "stationary poor." Thus, they argue that there needs to be a major shift in educational policy in order to meet the needs of disadvantaged adults. These literacy efforts should be pluralistic in nature, community-based and controlled, and structured around the specific needs and goals of the adults themselves.

Hunter and Harman explored and set forth the key issues with which we are dealing today. How we continue to address these issues will determine the nature and viability of adult literacy education in the 1990s and beyond. The first issue is the definition of "literacy" and "illiteracy." Is it possible to establish criteria which will support educators' and politicians' contentions that there are 27 to 60 million "functionally illiterate" people in the United States, or are such criteria and numbers forever beyond our reach due to the nature of literacy itself? The second issue is the question of who controls literacy education. Are literacy programs top-down enterprises developed, funded, marketed, and delivered by an interlocking network of politicians, governmental agencies, business leaders, and professional educators, or are they pluralistic and collaborative endeavors in which adult students themselves have a major voice? The third issue concerns the purpose of adult literacy education. Is it to produce a "literate work force," that is, individuals with narrowly defined literacy skills who will meet the needs of corporate capitalism? Or is it to help develop the critical thinking, reflective, imaginative, and engaged citizens that Greene contends are necessary for the remaking of our democratic community? The fourth issue is the relationship between literacy and social and economic justice. Does illiteracy lead to unemployment, poverty, and crime, or is it a result of an unjust social and economic system?

I will use these questions to explore current thinking on adult literacy education in five recent publications. These books and monographs reflect a range of present thought and perspectives concerning literacy and literacy education and reveal how researchers, scholars, and practitioners are dealing with these issues.

Defining Literacy

The short articles and responses in *Toward Defining Literacy* (Venezky , Wagner & Ciliberti, 1990) address specifically the interlocking nature of the four major issues described above. Such prominent scholars in the field as Chall, Fingeret, Mikulecky, Sticht, Venezky, and others explore different definitions and purposes of literacy, ways of measuring it, and the impact of various definitions on public policy. Like Hunter and Harman, most of the authors in this monograph contend that literacy is a relative and social construct:

> Simple literacy scales that declare, ex cathedra, the number of illiterates in America, are meaningless. What is needed is a definition of the ability levels required for different social contexts and individual life goals and the abilities of the adult population relative to these norms (Venezky, et al., 1990, p. 73)

Ultimately, however, I believe that such attempts at defining "ability levels" and "norms" are not only futile but potentially dangerous as well. How can we possibly arrive at acceptable definitions of literacy when there are countless numbers of different social and cultural contexts and likewise countless life goals, needs, and desires among the adult population? Realistically we cannot, but in our attempts to do so we usually produce reductive lists, scale, and criteria (consider APL) which are then used to categorize large segments of the population, often in detrimental ways. In this volume, Chall argues that "we need to agree on minimal standards at every age and grade - on the minimal standards for providing remediation and special help as early and as long as needed, not just standards for retention" (Chall, in Venezky, et al., 1990, p. 60). But when one asks who the "we" are who will agree on minimal standards, questions of class and race surface and issues of political and social power arise.

Toward Defining Literacy exposes the inseparable relationships among definitions of literacy, social and economic justice, purposes of literacy education, and control over literacy programs. Kaestle argues that literacy education must be tied to social reform and to a more participatory society. Fingeret contends that the easy generalizations and "crisis" arguments made by politicians, business leaders, and others concerning the negative effects of low literacy levels upon our national security and economic health are often simplistic: "Obviously, these arguments ignore the realities of social class and social structure. They also ignore the complex web of forces contributing to the present economic problems of the United States and deny the dignity of illiterate adults" (Fingeret, in Venezky et al., 1990, p. 36).

The dignity of illiterate adults is what we see often absent from definitions and discussions of adult literacy and literacy education. Instead, the discourse typically revolves around "functional skills" and "job literacy," as if illiterate adults had no personal, emotional, imaginative, social, and cultural lives, as if they were little more than functionaries within the world of corporate capitalism. But individuals in a democratic society are infinitely more than functionaries in a technocratic workplace, and adult literacy education must involve more than minimal training. The short essays in *Toward Defining Literacy* are a good place to begin exploring these issues.

Adult Participation and Control

The articles by Fingeret, Jurmo, and their colleagues in *Participatory Literacy Education* (1989) address directly the need for learner-controlled and community-based literacy efforts: "...most of the present programs are constrained by their underlying philosophy, which does not give learners a voice in the conduct of the program" (p. i). Fingeret's introductory essay further elaborates her work on the social and collaborative nature of literacy and sets forth the theoretical framework of the book. Jurmo in several essays similarly argues that without adult active participation in all aspects of the program - including curriculum development, instruction, and management - literacy education will remain inefficient and ultimately ineffective.

Both from a theoretical and a practical viewpoint, *Participatory Literacy Education* is concerned with the dignity and complexity of adults with limited literacy skills. Job training is put in its place within the broader context of literacy education as a means of helping to develop what John Dewey called the

"social intelligence" of critically-thinking citizens. Specific examples are given of workplace literacy programs which do not merely train workers to passively fit the molds prescribed by corporate management. Instead, through participatory and collaborative efforts, workers, unions, and management develop together programs which help workers expand their literacy and teamwork abilities by actively studying issues of direct concern to them. The article by Lytle and her colleagues demonstrates clearly how holistic and learner-empowering assessment strategies can benefit practitioners. Instead of controlling and labeling adults according to their various incompetencies, educators and adults are able to work together in deciding upon which strengths they should build and what directions their learning should take.

Although the authors of *Participatory Literacy Education* do not refer to semiotics, the theoretical underpinnings of their work are most clearly articulated by scholars with a semiotic orientation to literacy (for example, Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Scholes, 1985; Scholes, 1989). Semiotics, or the study of sign systems, assumes that the whole world is a text and that reading and writing are intertextual processes governed by actively involved individuals. We rewrite the texts that we read in the texts of our lives "and keep on rewriting our lives in the light of those texts" (Scholes, 1989, p. 155). Paulo Freire means something similar to this when he maintains that learning to read is learning to read the world. Moreover, semiotics assumes that reading and writing are social and ethical endeavors which are integrally tied to specific situational and cultural contexts. Thus, literacy education is a process of active engagement in which individuals struggle for meaning with all sorts of texts, both written and unwritten, and furthermore critique those texts from a particular group or class value base (Scholes, 1985).

The meager theoretical base of adult literacy education never ceases to surprise me. Whereas those involved with language education of all sorts at the elementary, secondary, and university levels freely make use of the insights gained by semioticians, linguists, literary critics, ethnographers, and others, those of us involved in adult literacy education for the most part seem to be continuously dealing with rather primitive notions of what it means to be literate, with how we should train people to meet corporate demands, and with myopic views of the relationships between literacy and socioeconomic justice. We do not learn from others too readily it seems. The authors of *Participatory Literacy Education* have learned, and they can teach us something.

Literacy and the Workforce

Jump Start: The Federal Role in Adult Literacy, by Forrest P. Chisman (1989) and *Leadership for Literacy: The Agenda for the 1990s* by Forrest P. Chisman and Associates (1990) are both occasions for excitement and, at the same time, apprehension. They present an unequivocal and needed national call-to-arms:literacy issues must be addressed immediately and over the long term by federal and state governments and the private sector. Both publications are plain-spoken, direct, and contain specific recommendations for immediate action. However, I am concerned with the way they deal with certain aspects of the four major issues I described at the beginning of this essay review: definitions of literacy, literacy related to social and economic justice, purposes of literacy instruction, and control over the nature of literacy instruction.

How do *Jump Start* and *Leadership for Literacy* address these four key issues and the ideals stated by Greene in the epigraph to this essay review? In many respects, there is acceptance of these ideals; in other regards, there is a lack of vision and understanding and an all-too-ready adherence to the status quo. Let me first briefly discuss what I find important and critically insightful in *Leadership for Literacy*. I will then present my concerns.

Literacy skills, as Fingeret points out (in probably the most critical article in the volume), are directly related to the materials and specific tasks at hand. Thus, programs that attempt to develop generalized or abstract skills are usually not effective. As Foster observes, literacy skills are simply not portable to all texts and all situations. Accordingly, literacy education must always be situated within a specific context and revolve around the personal, social, economic, and political needs and desires of the adults them-

selves (Bliss, Chisman, Chisman & Campbell, Fingeret, & Foster.) Alamprese maintains in her article that there is thus an immediate need for research which will help us better understand the strengths and weaknesses of various methodologies and materials such as, for example, cooperative learning strategies versus one-on-one tutoring. She says that this research should be qualitative, rather than experimental, because it is only through qualitative approaches that we begin to understand how literacy education best works with different people in an almost limitless number of specific contexts.

Several authors are critical of results achieved by various politicians, adult literacy professionals, and business leaders. Alamprese says that while ex-President Reagan touted his Adult Literacy Initiative, he did nothing to increase funding for research and development. Bliss observes that lack of funding has resulted in 20,000-40,000 adults on program waiting lists in Los Angeles. Haigler maintains that often coalitions, such as Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS), are largely ineffective because they are built around the status quo and the vested interests of the groups involved instead of the needs and desires of adult learners. And Chisman points out that the private sector spends most of its training money on mid- and upper-level employees and not on those in lower echelon jobs.

Chisman and Campbell maintain that there are not enough programs that integrate literacy development with job skills training. Those workplace programs that are being and should be developed must be comprehensive in nature and avoid a narrow job-audit approach which "may result in teaching no more than job-specific skills, rather than preparing employees with portable skills that will allow them to adapt to the changing workplace." (I am unable to cite page numbers since I am reading this volume in manuscript form.) Similarly, Fingeret says, as she did in Toward Defining Literacy, that a major concern is workplace literacy programs that merely emphasize the needs of employers and not those of workers and that are "narrow job training programs rather than literacy education."

There is much more in this volume that supports John Dewey's contention that the purpose of education is to develop the "social intelligence" and imagination of actively involved citizens. However, there are also various things in this book that are disturbing.

My major concerns with *Jump Start* and *Leadership for Literacy* can be grouped into three general categories: These are (a) perpetuation of stereotypes and questionable information, (b) restricted orientation, and (c) political nonprogressivism. I will discuss each in turn.

Perpetuation of Stereotypes and Questionable Information. *Jump Start* and several of the articles in *Leadership for Literacy* simply assert that there are 20 - 30 million Americans with inadequate literacy skills. Nowhere is there any support given for these figures, except for various direct and indirect references to the Adult Performance Level (APL) Project. The serious limitations of the APL study have been noted by different scholars, myself included (Kazemek, 1985), over the years. To continue using figures so beloved by the media may be a sound tactical move in order to win political and corporate support; however, it does little to clarify our understanding of literacy. Moreover, although several of the authors acknowledge the contextual nature of literacy, they nevertheless discuss a "continuum" of literacy skills along which literacy education should move adults. This kind of reasoning poses all sorts of theoretical difficulties.

Restricted Orientation. With the exception of the explicit contention by Fingeret that adults want and need to develop their literacy abilities for a wide variety of reasons, for example, "writing poetry, reading letters, or leading Bible study classes," most of the authors perceive literacy in a limited, "functional" sense. Literacy education is directed toward developing better workers. Other, and I believe more important, purposes such as those described by Greene (1988) and Hunter and Harman (1979) are either absent or given only passing mention. For example, I find no meaningful exploration of the way that literacy can help us expand our imaginations and thus our ability to construct alternative worlds. Similarly, I find little discussion of how literacy can help us gain more personal and political control in our lives.

Political Nonprogressivism. My most persistent concern with Jump Start and Leadership for Literacy involves several nonprogressive and, in a few cases, reactionary perspectives and contentions. Literacy education is presented as something to be done to adults. Programs, policy, materials, and so forth are to be determined by employers, educators, and state and federal governments. There is little acknowledgement of the necessity for learners to be involved in the kind of curriculum development, instruction, and program management that was described by Hunter and Harman and in *Participatory Literacy Education.* Likewise, I find several disturbing examples of "blaming the victims" for being poor and possessing minimal literacy abilities. Chisman maintains that low levels of literacy are responsible for our economic problems and social distress. He fails to address corporate and federal policies during the 1980s that were designed to maximize immediate profits and improve the living conditions of those at the upper end of the socioeconomic ladder at the expense of workers and the poor.

There are also several suggestions that are regressive in nature and reflect a lack of historical understanding. Foster, for example, discusses required literacy instruction for AFDC mothers, those on welfare, and those receiving unemployment compensation. The notion that literacy is something that can be forced upon someone is simply antithetical to what many of us in the field believe literacy is about. Moreover, such forced literacy instruction has already been tried decades ago to little effect (Hilliard, 1963). Packer and Cooper argue for a kind of privatization and free marketing of education when they suggest that "introducing more competition into the adult literacy system would foster quality in the system as a whole." Many of us see such a suggestion as potentially destructive to public education in the United States. Lastly, Chisman and Campbell's assertion, that "some form of certification that does reflect achievement of workforce literacy skills will have to be developed," raises the spectres of testing, certification, and labelling that Ivan Illich warned us of years ago.

Literacy as Cultural Action for Freedom

Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared (1989)* breathes life into those people the *Jump Start* report says are "seriously handicapped in their work and in their everyday lives by a lack of basic skills" (Chisman, 1989, p. 1). These people come alive as complex individuals with individual stories to tell full of hopes and yearnings, fears and frustrations. Rose, himself a product of a working-class, inner-city environment and now on the faculty of UCLA, describes in this exceptional book his own educational struggles and those of the underprepared children and adults with whom he has worked most of his professional life. Rose writes from the inside of the educational experiences that many adults with limited literacy abilities have had: "Let me try to explain how it feels to see again and again material you should once have learned but didn't" (p. 30).

Rose believes that teaching is a kind of "romance" (p. 102) during which teacher and students establish bonds of care and trust through dialogue and personal risk-taking. The teacher who has a democratic dedication to the developing intelligence of every person knows that literacy can help individuals "redefine" themselves (p. 148) and gain more control over their personal and, perhaps, socioeconomic lives. The teacher does not scale down "expectations as so many remedial programs do" (p. 140) but instead builds upon the individual and collective strengths of students. The job of a literacy instructor is to help students learn to make "some new moves" (p. 151).

Learning to make new moves, I believe, is what adult literacy education is about. How we perceive our students, our purpose, and our role will determine whether or not these new moves are generative and potentially liberating in various ways or are little more than circumscribed gestures made at someone else's request. How we see our students, Rose tells us, how we attempt to assess their abilities and measure their growth will determine how we learn and grow and what we do in the classroom.

> The important fact [is] that if you set up the right conditions, try as best you can to cross class and cultural boundaries, figure out what's needed to encourage performance, that if you watch and listen, again and again there will emerge evidence of ability that escapes those who dwell on differences. (1989, p. 222)

Lives on the Boundary is part biography, part philosophy, part pedagogy, and part critique of our educational and social systems; in parts, it reads like a novel. It is a generous book that affirms the power of the word and the imagination in a democratic society. It should be read by everyone committed to, as Paulo Freire says, literacy as cultural action for freedom.

Conclusion

The books I have reviewed in this essay show the strides that we have made in adult literacy education during the last decade or so. Theory, research, and practice have helped us begin to turn in new and more promising directions. We have built, and are building, upon the most vigorous insights and practices from the past while we continue to explore and expand our understanding of the complex nature of literacy within an ever-increasingly complex society. At the same time, however, these works document in various ways the persistence of unproductive literacy stereotypes and practices. We must continue to examine all definitions of literacy and challenge programs which circumscribe rather than enhance the personal, imaginative, social, and economic power of people. We still have a great deal of work to do.

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Research Review: Adult Learners' Perspectives on Adult Education

by Deborah D'Amico-Samuels

In 1987, the Literacy Assistance Center began a study designed to capture the experiences and viewpoints of students from a sample of New York City Adult Literacy Initiative Programs over a thre year period. The findings of the first phase were reported in Focus on Adult Literacy: Expectations, Experiences and Needs of New York City's Adult Literacy Students (Denny, Albert and Manes, 1989), published by the LAC, and in an article in the June 1989 Information Update written by Joan Manes (Adults in New York City Literacy Programs: Phase I of a Longitudinal Study). Despite an average of eight attempts to reach each study participant, only 216 students and former students were successfully contacted in the second phase (see box for discussion of the representativeness of this sample). Analysis of data from these interviews, conducted in 1989, was completed over the past summer. This article will briefly summarize the conclusions of this second

phase.

RETENTION

Perhaps the most important finding of this phase concerns retention. Among ESOL students interviewed a second time, 36.1% were still attending the same program, 24.1% were going to a different adult education program and 39.8% were not attending any classes. Among BE Phase II respondents, the proportions were 53%, 12% and 36% respectively (these percentages add up to more than 100% because there is one person who attends two programs). The fact that roughly 60% of adult learners in this sample are still enrolled in a program is substantial evidence of successful retention in New York City Adult Literacy Initiative programs.

THE IMPACT OF ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS THROUGH STUDENTS' EYES

Literacy Skills

The overwhelming majority of adult learners interviewed in Phase II reported improvement in their ability to read, write and (for ESOL students) to speak English and credited their programs as the source of this improvement. Among ESOL students, 87% indicated improved reading ability, 78% said they could write better, 91% reported improved ability to speak English, and 37.2% stated they had improved their ability to do math. Among BE students, 93% reported improvement in their reading ability, 75% said they could write better, and 68% indicated improved ability to do math. Non-native speakers of English who attended BE programs were also asked whether their ability to speak English had improved. Of the 33 in the BE sample to whom this applied, 25 said it had improved and 18 of these attributed the improvement to their adult education program. Students experience this improvement in many aspects of their lives. Below, we briefly discuss the impact of programs on parenting, work and leisure.

Impact of Programs on Students' Roles as Parents

> "At school, my relation with my teacher is very good, so I know that my son's teacher is similar in the sense that she also teaches, so I relate to her the same way that I relate to my teacher at school."

ADULT LEARNERS: WHO ARE THEY?

Adults served by New York City Adult Literacy Initiative programs are reflective of the diversity of New York, particularly its more recent immigrants. The 216 adults interviewed in this phase are roughly similar in gender, ethnicity and age to adult learners in the city (as reflected in the citywide data base maintained by the LAC) and to the full sample of 663 adults interviewed in Phase I. Most were between the ages of 25 and 44, roughly two-thirds were women, and the overwhelming majority classified themselves as Black or Hispanic. Nearly all of those enrolled in ESOL classes were foreign born. In keeping with the mission of the New York City Adult Literacy Initiative to serve out-of-school youth and adults reading below a 9th grade level, none of the participants were enrolled in GED classes.

Two exceptions to the overall representativeness of the second phase interviewees should be noted. Considerably fewer foreign-born BE students were interviewed in the second phase, and males were somewhat underrepresented among Phase II respondents.

"They made it easier, my kids, because if I misspell something, they correct me. Before I was ashamed, now I feel great."

The ways in which participation in adult education programs affects the children of adult learners was addressed in Phase II interviews. On every indicator, a positive impact attributed to program attendance was found. Sixty-five respondents (44 ESOL and 21 BE) had children under age 12; sixty-four percent of these ESOL parents and 73.7% of these BE students said they read to their children. Of the 97 adult learners with children 9 years of age and over, 73.6% of ESOL and 68.2% of BE students wrote to their children. A clear majority of these credited their program participation with making these activities easier. The findings with regard to helping school age children with homework parallel these. Because research on early childhood education is unequivocal in asserting the importance of reading to children for assuring success in school, this is an important finding.

Literacy and the Workplace

"I can communicate much better. Without the knowledge I've acquired through my program, I would not have my job."

"I started as a handyman, very little English. Now the English improved. I'm working as a foreman."

"[It helps with] signing things--like writing things. I went to Social Service for my client and they asked me to spell her name, and the social worker required my help."

At the time of the second interview, 66% of the ESOL students and 61% of the BE participants were working. Among BE students, employment in personal care or cleaning/custodial work was a common occupational pattern. Employed ESOL students were most likely to work in factory/assembly plants or in personal care.

The overwhelming majority of employed respondents in Phase II (88 ESOL and 51 BE interviewees) reported that improvement in their basic skills as a result of participation in adult education programs made them more effective at work. Eighty percent of the working ESOL students who reported improved skills said that their work has improved as a result of their increased ability to read, 67% noted a positive impact on work based on improved writing ability, and 44% reported that their greater math skills had a positive effect on their work. Seventy-three percent of the working ESOL students said that their improved English speaking abilities had improved their work performance. Among BE students who recognized improvement in their basic skills, 79% reported a positive impact on work due to improved reading, 69% noted increased ability to write had enhanced their job performance, 53% said improvements in math were benefitting them at work, and 67% of non-native English speakers reported improved English skills were helping them to do a better job.

A more precise understanding of the literacy demands of specific workplaces would be useful in planning curriculum and would help to address concerns in the literacy field regarding the need to prepare adult learners for the jobs of the 21st century. There is also a need to identify industries and jobs which offer learners opportunities to use their improved skills and to benefit from the ability to do so. Perhaps literacy programs can provide a link between the skills adult education programs develop and the kinds of workplaces in which adult learners express interest, and/or those which have a need to recruit workers.

Adult Learners Opinions of their Programs

". . .since I'm coming here [to an adult education program] I see something ahead of me. You know, that's why I do not want to drop it--because I feel I would lose something so . . .solid to me."

Seventy-two percent of the 216 interviewees reported satisfaction with the programs which they were attending or had attended, with 81% indicating that they would seek another program in the future. Of those who said they had friends or relatives in need of adult education services, approximately 95% stated they would recommend adult education programs to these individuals. The latter is especially important because there is evidence that word of mouth circulating through networks of family and friends may be one of the most effective recruitment strategies.

Implications

> "I was invited to join a visiting program as an aunt. I visited 4th grade and I was able to help them. I felt like an educated adult."

The findings of this phase of the longitudinal study provide evidence that participation in adult education has a pronounced impact on the employment, families, and social lives of adult learners. Participants in this study offer a very positive assessment of their achievements, their commitment to education and its impact on their lives. Standardized measures of achievement in skills and statistics regarding program attendance can provide only a limited picture of adult learners. Adult learners here report increased ability and effectiveness in a range of literacy activities at home, at work and in their communities. They also suggest ways in which programs have failed to accommodate them, and ways in which their own complicated lives have interfered with their participation in programs. All of this information provides valuable direction for policymakers, and underscores the continued need to ground literacy policy and practice in the rich context of the lives of adult learners.

What Next?

The LAC is working on a full report of this second interim phase which includes more detail and findings in addition to those reported above.

Currently, data from the third set of interviews, conducted in Spring of 1990, is being processed. To provide a truly longitudinal profile of student experiences, the data sets from all three phases of this study must be linked and analyzed together. This will allow us to make statements regarding the experience of individual students over the three-year period. We will be able to say, for example, whether students who expressed a desire to change jobs accomplished their goals. The Research Unit of the LAC hopes to include adult learners, literacy practitioners, and other interested members of the literacy community in the process of interpreting the full data set. The Update will keep its readers posted on the continued analysis of this longitudinal study.

Minigrants 1989-1990

by Fran Richetti Joyce

The Literacy Assistance Center in the fall of 1989, awarded $6,000 in minigrants to seven literacy programs in the New York City Adult Literacy Initiative. The purpose of the awards is to provide an opportunity for adult literacy practitioners to develop innovative projects or to complete ongoing projects which would improve classroom instruction or enrich support services to students. The minigrant program is funded through the LAC contract with the Mayor's Office for Education Services. Copies of the final reports may be obtained by calling Joan Pleune at the Literacy Assistance Center (212-267-5309).

The seven winning proposals were selected by a review panel comprised of members of New York City's literacy providing agencies - the Board of Education, the City University of New York, the Community Development Agency, and the three library systems. The agencies receiving grants were:

- The Brooklyn Public Library Literacy Program
- Hostos Community College Adult Basic Education Program
- Lehman College Adult Learning Center
- New York Public Library Centers for Reading and Writing
- The Open Book/Good Shepherd Services
- York College Community Learning Center
- YWCA ELESAIR Project

Profiles of each project follow:

A ***Course Manual for Teachers of Basic Literacy in Spanish*** (Hostos Community College Adult Basic Education Program)

This manual was produced by Irma de la Torre in response to the need for suitable training materials and curricula guides for teachers and tutors of adult basic literacy in Spanish. It provides the instructor with a selection of basic pedagogical tools that may be immediately applied in the classroom to maximize student outcomes. This manual is intended for use by experienced or novice basic literacy teachers or tutors, and includes examples of activities and teaching

techniques. If there are further questions, contact Irma de la Torre at (212) 960-1251.

Oral Histories (The Open Book)

John Gordon and Stephanie Lawson spent 18 months taping and transcribing oral life histories of four students. These texts were then used as reading materials in classes at The Open Book. Any questions regarding the project should be addressed to John Gordon or Stephanie Lawson. They may be reached at The Open Book (718) 965-9473.

How to Teach English Through Song (YWCA ELESAIR Project)

Sheila Dekel's Pronunciation and Listening Class was instituted to quell frustration for both staff and students. Its purpose is to aid students in improving their accents and pronunciation so they may better communicate with their teachers and with each other. Students find that, in singing American songs (folk, patriotic, etc.), almost all accents disappear. Sheila's manual describes the procedure for introducing music as an aid to pronunciation, including materials needed and methods of teaching breath control and the concept of rhythm. For further information, contact Sheila Dekel at (212) 255-4200.

Small Group Assessment Model
(New York Public Library, Centers for Reading and Writing, St. Agnes Branch)

This assessment model was developed by Melody Schneider and Tom Peele in response to the need for an alternative to the standardized testing model. It was perceived that students often feel discouraged in reaction to the results of tests; that although it is common for a student to have experienced growth in their reading ability, this is sometimes not reflected in test scores. This model, which reflects the instructional philosophy of the CRW, allows students to participate in their assessment. It also provides them with tangible evidence of growth, and shows areas that still need improvement. Questions can be addressed to Melody Schneider or Tom Peele at the CRW, St. Agnes Branch, (212) 787-4014.

Literacy Materials for Non-Native Speakers of English (York College Community Learning Center)

The objective of this project, undertaken by Linda Ribaudo and Darlyne Walker, was to develop materials that can be used in classes composed of students who are non-literate in their native language, or, alternately, with literacy students in a mixed-level ESOL class. Their assumption is that the more literacy skills students possess in their native language, the easier it is to transfer their skills to the second language. The needs of ESL literacy students place a great demand upon the instructor who must be prepared with a variety of materials to suit the varying needs and abilities of class participants. Linda Ribaudo and Darlyne Walker can be reached at York College (718) 262-2360.

Problem-Solving Skills in Everyday Living
(Brooklyn Public Library Literacy Program)

In many literacy programs, mathematics is not an integral part of the curriculum, or is often given short shrift. For this project, Judy Franz and Sherman Jones proposed to design a 12-week session where students, from new readers to pre-GED level, would meet to discuss real life situations. These included menus, trip planning, map reading, budgets, and grocery shopping. From each discussion, students and their teacher would develop a word problem, using the Language Experience Approach. The word problem then generates vocabulary and a math problem. From the list of "real life" situations, four were chosen; three sessions were then devoted to each situation. This final report documents the project and includes lessons. Sherman Jones and Judy Franz can be reached at (718) 778-9330.

Developing a Profile of the Adult Learning Center's ESOL Population (Lehman College Adult Learning Center)

The proposers, Azi Ellowitch and Karen Griswold, conducted a study which will construct a profile of the ESOL population in Lehman's Adult Learning Center. Questions explored are: what do the students want from the program; what is their back-

ground in native language literacy; why do some stay and some leave soon after enrollment; would they find native language literacy classes useful. The report produced will interpret data from the study and will indicate directions for the ESOL program. This report is not yet on file. If you would like a copy, call Joan Pleune at the LAC and she will send a copy as soon as it becomes available.

All minigrant reports will be available for viewing in the LAC Clearinghouse as soon as we receive them.

Minigrants 1990 - 1991

A review committee of practitioners from the literacy field has selected five applicants to receive Literacy Assistance Center minigrant awards for program year 1990-1991. These projects are to be completed by May 30, 1991, and will be availablein the LAC Clearinghouse in the 1991-92 program year. Following are the names of minigrant recipients, their agencies, and the titles of their projects:

1. Cheryl Georges
   Brooklyn College
   Revision of "SUDS," a soap opera for new readers
   $1000.00

2. Moisés Agosto
   Bronx Educational Services
   Living with AIDS. You can do it.
   12 easy-to-read pamphlets in Spanish
   for ESOL students.
   $1000.00

3. John Gordon
   The Open Book
   Student Journal Project
   $1000.00

4. Maritza Arrastia
   Mothers' Reading Program
   American Reading Council
   Trilingual book of short stories -
   Chinese, Spanish, English
   $1000.00

5. Linda Ribaudo/Darlyne Walker
   York College
   Books for the new reader in ESL Literacy Classes
   $1000.00

Santiago - Continued from page 6

the problems, dope, domestic problems, not enough money, they all go together. It's really got to be personal, like saying, "Hey look, is it al lright if I visit you?" It's the only way you're going to find out, especially when they gave up, what the reasons were.

It happens in Alcoholics Anonymous, it happens in Narcotics Anonymous, you get support. The idea is for students to go to a place where they do understand. I know what students feel. The students out there who have dropped out, all they want is a little help, somebody to reach out to them. I can do that, whether I have to go to their house, whatever the need is, to help that student come to school. Support groups support you when you want to be with somebody and talk, they support you if you need a job. I want that kind of support for adult literacy. Groups taught me how to be a productive citizen. They taught me when to ask for help. Why can't adult literacy have groups that reach out to people?

A group could do other things. You need somebody to take you to a bank and show you how to save money. Driving is another thing we're afraid of. Things are such a fear to us because we never did them before. Motor vehicles, libraries, all these things that you're supposed to be able to do that other people take for granted, if you don't read, it's a nightmare. This support could be provided. It doesn't have to cost much money. It's just got to be provided. You don't have to go see a social worker. Students tell social workers what they want to hear or what they can get out of them, like will you fix my letter? Students tell me so much they wouldn't tell a teacher or a tutor, because I can really relate to them and I can really understand what they're going through.

A job. Going for a job terrifies me. What you need is somebody to say, "Look, I'll go with you." You get that from a friend. Why can't the program provide that? This would be a community of people, of people helping each other. You don't need a lot of money to do these services.

Sam is working with people in the field to obtain funding for the student support project. You can contact him at Bronx Educational Services at (212) 991-7310 if you know of possible funding sources.

National Center on Adult Literacy

The National Center on Adult Literacy (NCAL) at the University of Pennsylvania was established by the U.S. Department of Education in October 1990, with federal co-funding by the Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services expected to reach $10.2M over five years. The NCAL will take the initiative for establishing a national agenda for adult literacy research and development, and will involve both experienced practitioners and leading researchers in the process. It will initiate studies on key issues identified within this agenda and will also encourage and support research on these issues by other qualified institutions and individuals.

In pursuit of improved literacy levels for all Americans, NCAL has three basic goals:

1) To improve our understanding of adult literacy and to create a useful knowledge base upon which practice may be built by focusing on three main program areas: Participation and Service Delivery; Learning and Instruction; and Impact and Policy. The questions to be addressed include the following: Why are participation and retention rates so low for adult literacy programs? How can adult literacy programs be made more effective? How do service delivery factors such as teacher recruitment and professionalism, staff development, student assessment and management influence participation and retention? How can information about adult literacy services be made more accessible to those who need it? How are literacy skills acquired by adults? How do cross-linguistic factors affect adult literacy learning? Questions such as these need to be addressed before major progress can be made in the field

2) To improve the overall quality of research and development in adult literacy, part of the NCAL's research strategy will be to form partnerships with organizations, agencies and individuals who do research in adult literacy or in related areas and who will cooperate in joint research and development projects with the NCAL. Two New York City-based organizations, the City University of New York and the Literacy Assistance Center will be among the cooperating agencies.

3) To ensure a working, two-way link between practitioners and researchers, the Center will not only engage in all of the standard information dissemination activities but will also study the adequacy of its various dissemination efforts.

The challenges of adult literacy in today's world are great, and NCAL will attempt not only to provide leadership in research and development, but also to work as a collaborative partner in attempting to solve this pressing social problem.

For more information, contact

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Literacy Assistance Center

Clearinghouse Hours

Wednesday
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Other Times by Appointment

Literacy Assistance Center
Publications

Access to Adult Basic Education: African-American Perspectives (Program Guidelines for Recruitment and Retention), Deborah D'Amico-Samuels, Ph.D. (1990)

Adult Literacy Education: A Review of the Research and Priorities for Future Inquiry, prepared by Gordon G. Darkenwald, Ph.D. (1986)

Adult Literacy Information and Evaluation System (ALIES) : Background, Status and Future Directions (1987)

Adult Literacy Program Personnel Profile, prepared by Metis Associates, Inc. (1986)

Analysis of New York City's Adult Literacy Data Base: 1985-1986, prepared by Metis Associates, Inc. (1987)

Analysis of New York City's Adult Literacy Data Base: 1986-1987, prepared by Metis Associates, Inc. (1990)

Analysis of New York City's Adult Literacy Data Base: 1988-1989, prepared by Metis Associates, Inc. (1991)

Employment and Adult Literacy: Critical Facts, prepared by Janice Lee Albert (1990)

Focus on Adult Literacy: Expectations, Experiences and Needs of New York City's Adult Literacy Students (Phase One of a Longitudinal Study), Verna Haskins Denny, Janice Lee Albert, and Joan Manes (1989)

Guide to Needs and Location Map of New York City Literacy Programs, prepared by Verna Haskins Denny (1985)

New York City Adult Literacy Initiative - Fiscal Year 1985, (Summary and full versions available) (1985)

New York City Adult Literacy Initiative - Fiscal Year 1986, (Summary and full versions available) (1987)

New York City Adult Literacy Initiative - Fiscal Year 1987 (1989)

New York City Adult Literacy Initiative - Final Report 1988-1989 (1990)

New York City Adult Literacy Initiative - Final Report 1989-1990 (1991)

Starting Over: Characteristics of Adult Literacy Learners, M. Trika Smith-Burke, Ed.D. (1987)

Study of Adult Literacy Curricula, prepared by Susan Koen, Matrices Consultants, Inc. (1986)

Youth and Literacy: A Critical Issues Paper, prepared by Delia L. Council (1990)

To order a publication, please contact the Research Unit, Literacy Assistance Center, 15 Dutch Street, New York, NY 10038.

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